

All About Grace

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I thought I would think out loud about what is said to be grace. Everybody uses the word. It is very common in India to say, “It is all His grace; it is your grace.” These are very common expressions. In the Western culture also, I see the word grace being used often. The source of grace is always assumed to be the Lord, the one who is beyond our empirical purview. Even though people really don’t understand what this Lord, or God, or *Īśvara* is, that person is accepted as the source of grace by those who recognize that there is grace in one’s life. In the Indian tradition there is a lot of thinking about this grace (*anugraha, kṛpā*). We don’t simply accept things without inquiry (*vicāra*). Our whole tradition is a tradition based on inquiry. Even the cultural forms are connected to religion and the religious forms are connected to the wisdom and the wisdom is born of inquiry (*vicāra*). The *vicāra* is inquiry into the source books, (*sāstra-vicāra*), inquiry into them as a means of knowledge (*pramāṇa-vicāra*).

What Is Grace?

Suppose the grace comes from *Īśvara*, the Lord. In that case, he has to choose. How is he going to choose to whom he is going to give grace today? Getting up in the morning he has to ask Lakshmi, “Today, to whom should I give?” He should use some method of choosing, a lucky-dip perhaps. How is he going to choose the person who deserves the grace? We always think that grace is something that comes to us from somewhere—sometimes asked and sometimes unasked, now and then. Really speaking grace is the result of *karma*. But we do not know when we did the *karma* to earn the grace. Nor do we know which *karma* is the cause for this particular grace. When I am not able to pinpoint which *karma* is responsible for this desirable thing which is with me now, I gracefully say that it is grace. It is the result of action, (*karma-phala*) gracefully expressed. The result of *karma* earned by you, either in this birth or in a prior birth (*asmin janmani janmāntare vā*), that produces grace, is definitely not a simple *karma* which is self-centered. It is not centered on a small self that is confined to yourself the individual, or to your small family. That *karma* is not going to win grace. But when you reach out to do something to help another person, to help the community, to help other living organisms in this world, when you do something which implies a self which accommodates more than the small unit called the

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family, that karma, called *pūrta-karma*, earns grace. In days gone by, people established things for public use like a well, a pond, even a temple of worship, a place where people can go and relax (*vāpi-kūpa-tadākādi devatāyatanañ ca*). All these are called *pūrtakarma*. Doing any of them wins grace. But we don't know which *karma* produced which grace. Similarly, our daily prayers, rituals, and so on, also win grace.

Source of Grace

Grace is not something that the Lord distributes to some chosen people. It is something that we earn as a result of our actions (*karma-phala*). The Lord, of course, is very much present in it as the one who gives the results of actions (*karma-phala-dātā*). The laws produce the result of action, and those laws are not separate from *Īśvara*.

The world (*jagat*) cannot be entirely different from the cause, the maker. If this *jagat*, the world, has a certain reality, this reality cannot come into being without some material. The maker has got to have not only some material, but an appropriate material. The appropriateness is in terms of what is contained in the product, and also in terms of its reality. Thus, a certain appropriate material is inevitable in the hands of *Īśvara*, the maker. Further, the material cannot be separate from the maker. If the material is separate from the maker what separates is space or time, but space and time themselves are products. They are part and parcel of the whole, the *jagat*. Therefore space does not yet exist to separate the material from *Īśvara*. Both the material and the maker are identical. *Īśvara* “created, he himself became,” *asṛjata svayam abhavat*. This is a very important message from the Veda. “He desired, ‘May I become many. May I produce.’ He reflected (on the previous creation). Having reflected, he created all this, whatever is here,” *so'kāmayata. bahu syām prajāyeya iti. sa tapo atapyata sa tapstaptvā idam sarvam asṛjata yad idam kiñca*. He himself became everything. As a maker he is ‘he’, as the material, ‘she’. Thus we have an *Īśvara* whose manifestation—not even creation, because we have a creation only when the material is different from the creator—is the *jagat*. If he has become the *jagat*, if he is manifest in the form of *jagat* which includes your body, mind, sense complex, then there is no question of the material being separate from *Īśvara*. This a very important thing to know.

What is grace? The maker and the material being identical, and the *jagat* being not separate from the Lord, the laws, which are also the Lord, produce the results of action. Some of these laws are known to me partially. And many laws are unknown to me. We don't even understand in-laws, let alone natural laws! But one thing we know is that the laws, being what they are, don't err. They don't transgress themselves. Therefore, I can relax in the awareness that

the laws cannot cheat me. In keeping with the laws, for all those special actions that I have done I have earned some favorable result (*karma-phala*) which is called *punya*. But I cannot pinpoint the *karma* that brought this to me. In life you have to be at the right place at the right time, and I cannot say what accounts for that happening.

I don't know whether it is true, but definitely you all think that being in America you are at the right place. Some of the new-comers, however, think they are not here at the right time—unless they are engaged in an internet startup company and can sell it for a windfall. Others always think that they have come a little late. You are at the right place, but at the wrong time. To be at the right place at the right time is not in our hands. It is very funny how we have a lot of plans. If you want to make God laugh—because he is a serious guy—all you have to do is tell him your plans for the future. Between the cup and the lips there are always slips. Therefore, to be at the right place at the right time is not in my hands. I don't call all the shots. One's whole life is a percentage game, like baseball. We don't call the shots. When this kind of human predicament is there, the self-conscious human being recognizes his helplessness. When one recognizes one's helplessness and then one finds oneself in a favorable situation, the pragmatic, objective human being cannot but recognize and acknowledge something unknown which shaped this situation in his favor. One has to acknowledge that fact.

Recognizing Grace

People who acknowledge grace are objective people. They are pragmatic. Grace is a graceful acceptance of a situation. It is also grace that keeps us going. You see the green light and drive on assuming that the other fellow saw the red light. This assumption is purely rooted in grace, because you have no basis to make such an assumption. It is pure trust. The other fellow may be seeing many lights, because he had one too many Lights—Bud's Light. How do you know that even after having seen the red light he won't drive through it?

When you breathe out, definitely there is the hope that you will breathe in, that the air that you breathed out will come back. You breathe out thinking it will come back, for if you have a doubt you will try not to breathe out. When you breathe out hoping the breath will come back, there is the possibility that it may not come back at all. And look at this pumping heart. It is the greatest blessing. Even though it is a simple pump, it is much more than a mere pump. How sturdy it is. It started even before you were born, before you had seen the light of day. And it has been pumping all the time without any rest. If I ask you to clench your fist and open it again for fifteen minutes, after ten minutes you will want to have a tea break. But this blessed heart has got

to work all the time. It has no respite at all. Even if you go into a coma it goes on. It is an amazing organ. It is just tissues, but definitely between lub and dub I see a certain grace. After lub there need not be dub at all. It can be lublub. It is lub grace dub. Grace lub grace dub grace lub.

What I am saying is that there is this unpredictability, and that is what grace is about. It is not something that visits us occasionally. It is there very much with us between lub and dub. That we are alive is a miracle. That we are still sane is another miracle. That we remain married and each one admires the other is the miracle of miracles. It is called *āścarya*, a wonder. That you are blessed with children is another miracle. Every time you go out and come back in one piece, it is a miracle. We hear of accidents every day, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions.

I was an avid reader of the news, and then one day gave up reading the newspaper. Three years later, when I picked one up again, I found no difference at all. And when I looked into the sports page, I found that India had lost the test match! That we are able to retain our sanity in spite of this, is due to grace. The grace seems to work overtime. It is such a beautiful thing to recognize the beauty of living, to appreciate that I am alive and kicking. Every moment is a reality. It unfolds something precious to me. And if I am with the moment I enjoy. To recognize grace one has to recognize the meaning, the profundity, the miracle, in fact, of just living.

Earning Grace—Exercising Free Will

We earn grace by actions which are deliberate, not by our reactions. Actions that reach out, actions of prayer, earn grace. Most of us are busy day after day, with our time consumed by our reactions and reactions to reactions. First we react in anger and say things which are inappropriate. Then we regret what we said. That is another reaction. It is through actions alone that we can express ourselves.

What really makes you different from any other living being on this planet is your capacity to choose. That capacity to choose is what is called free-will. If a cow is a vegetarian it is not by choice, but if you are one, it is by choice. That is will. You choose. And this freedom that our will seems to have is an inhibited freedom. It is not total freedom because you are always in a situation where you are called upon to do something appropriate to the situation. I may not like to do it, but I have to do it because it is my duty. Indians invariably have this concept of duty, (*kartavyam*). Even with regard to work they say, “I’m going for duty,” “I have resigned my duties,” or “I have joined duty.” I receive letters all the time saying, “Swamiji I have fulfilled all

my duties. I want to come along with you.” Now it becomes my duty to take care of this fellow! The concept of duty imposes a pressure on you unless you love to do what needs to be done. If you have to do it, whether you like it or not, then it is better to learn to like it.

That is how I learned to like a few things. I never liked karela, bittergourd. And I never could understand why anybody would like it. After I became a *sādhu* I decided I would eat this bittergourd. I made a resolve, *sāṅkalpa*. Once you have made a *sāṅkalpa* you have to keep to it. I was invited to lunch and this vegetable was served. Since I had made the *sāṅkalpa* I quietly ate it. It was difficult, but I ate it. But the hostess thought I liked the bittergourd, and served a second helping. Since I had decided to eat bittergourd, I ate that serving also. The third time I had to say, “Enough.” Then somebody else invited me to lunch. That person phoned the other person and asked, “What does Swamiji like?” The answer was, “Swamiji loves bittergourd.” Then the information jumped cities also. Before I went to a place, bittergourd was waiting there. I ended up eating bittergourd all the time. Wherever I went, there it was. In the process I learned to like it.

This is an effective example to show that when I am constrained to do a certain thing, it is better that I love that thing. I have to learn to like it. Then I have no pressure. Because of pressure my free-will is always inhibited. With a murmur, having lodged a complaint I do something. With a dissatisfaction I do it. Then free-will becomes a hostage in the hands of your own *rāga dveṣa*, likes and dislikes. Even when you reach out it does not come from your heart. It is because you are pressured. Suppose you happen to drive in the city of Madras. You stop for a red light. Then the beggars come and beg. There is a newcomer in that group of beggars. He asks once, very matter-of-factly, does not get any response, and goes to the next person and to the next person and so on. He asks once and moves on. He doesn’t know how to beg. He has to learn from the others. The experienced beggars make you feel so wretched by their whining, that you end up giving. The giving is more to get rid of your wretchedness than to help the beggar. This is not giving. You have to give with all your heart; then only is there grace. There is no other way of earning grace. It has to come out of you. Be bigger than you think you are. You are as much as you think you are. You can have millions of dollars and still feel small because you can’t open up. A rich man is that person who has one rupee. He is begging for his living. When another beggar comes to him and says, “I am hungry,” he gives away that one rupee because he is richer by a rupee. He is the rich man, not the millionaire who cannot part with a penny.

Only when you reach out and do something do you win grace. Prayer also is like that. It is not that easy to pray and it is very difficult to pray heartily. The ego will not let that happen.

Even though the person knows that he is helpless, still, there is something that makes him incapable of praying. Why? It is some kind of an authority problem. Those who cannot pray may have some real problem with their father. It is a psychological issue.

Grace is something you have to tap. It is not distributed by God. It is like underground water in that you have to tap it, and the tapping is done by action alone. Grace is always there. It is a possibility like any other possibility. There are many things that are manifest, surfaced, in this universe. There are also many potential possibilities lying there for you to tap. Every piece of software is a possibility. Every piece of hardware is a possibility. This grace is another possibility. Nobody prays simply because he or she is under pressure. People think that when you are in trouble you will pray. No. When you are in trouble you hit your head on the wall. You phone somebody and cry. Or you go on a buying spree and purchase a lot of things you cannot use. You need not pray. Prayer is the only action where the will is totally free, because you need not pray. It is an action, *karma*. It is a physical, oral or mental action (*kāyikam vācikam mānasam karma*). Mentally you pray, deliberately; orally you pray, or ritually you pray. Prayer is a deliberate action where the free-will is totally free—an uninhibited free-will. It is that kind of action that wins grace. This is why we say, “I perform this *karma* to win the grace of *Parameśvara* (*śrī parameśvara-prityartham aham idam kariṣye*). It is not to please *Īśvara*. If *Īśvara* has to be pleased, we’ve had it. Then we have to keep him in good humor. No, we win the grace.

There are varieties of grace. We first identify grace from the original source as *Īśvara*’s grace. There are subsets also. There is the guru’s grace, the elders’ grace, which we earn by doing *seva* etc. Besides the grace of *Īśvara* (*īśvara -kṛpā*), and of the guru (*guru-kṛpā*), we require the grace of the *sāstra* (*sāstra-kṛpā*). The guru may be there, but when you pick up the book you go to sleep. The *sāstra* has to reveal itself. That is also *Īśvara*’s grace, but a subset of it. Finally, there is *ātma-kṛpā*—you should be deserving of grace. You should be earning that grace. Sometimes we don’t recognize the grace. It is like the flowers that bloom in your own garden, after so much work by your wife. Yet you don’t even look at them because you are so busy; your mind is occupied completely by the problems that are to be solved. Naturally, therefore, you have no eyes to see. Grace is available. Acknowledge it. In the eyes of your child you can see the grace. When you open your mouth and say a good word there is grace flowing. You have to be aware of it. You find that your life is one of grace. That is *ātma-kṛpā*. You earn that grace by reaching out, by recognizing a cause and doing what you have to do. Recognize a

situation where you have got to do something. See whether the cause is worthwhile. Don't fritter away your energy, your resources, the money you have earned. Identify a worthy cause, reach out and be bigger than you think you are. This is how we grow. This is how we earn grace.